

## THE CHURCH OF THE HUNTED STAG.

### A TALE FOR THE CHILDREN.

In the days of old there was in a forest of Germany a monastery and a church. It was hidden away in the depths of the tall trees, and it was built by monks, who laboured with their own hands at bringing the stones from the quarry and at carving the figures for the pillars and the walls. The bishops of the country and all the high officers of the Emperor's court knew it as the Abbey of St. Boniface, for Boniface had been as an angel to the land, and they gave his name to many churches; but the people who lived and had lived, their fathers and grandfathers from time immemorial, in the clearings of the forest, called it the Church of the Hunted Stag.

And this is how it got its name.

As yet the country was half savage, and the heathen gods lived on, Woden, Thor, and Freya; for the great king Woden did not without a struggle give up his monarchy to the new king Christ. So some of St. Boniface's followers had come to this district meaning to build a church there, and to teach the people Christianity. Down fell the forest trees, and in a short time there was a clearing large enough for the monks to begin upon. For in those days the monks, the clergy of the time, could carry in the stones in the morning hours, and sing the vespers at the sunset. Thus the church walls slowly rose, and the nave was finished. Then they set themselves to work more carefully at the eastern end, as the fashion was and is; and they came to their Abbot and said,

"Father, you know that nave and chancel are almost finished, and part of the church is roofed. But upon the eastern wall nothing is carved, and we must have an altar-piece. And now we have worked together as friends and brothers; but who among us all shall carve that altar-piece, and what shall it be? Do you decide, and the workman that is the best, choose him. The best man for the best work."

And the Abbot named one, and said,

"Leave him in peace; let him do what he will."

And the monk whom the Abbot had chosen went into the church the same day, and he knelt before the bare wall and thought. All day long he knelt there, and round him rose the sound of chisel, and hammer, and saw, as the monks sang and whistled at their work, for they delighted in it; but they did not trouble him, and he knelt on and thought. This he did three days, and then he said to himself, "If it had been my work I should have dreamed of a design—some saint, some legend, or a glimpse of something holy that I could carve in stone. The work is not for me." And he went to the Abbot, and the rest, and said, "The work is not for me." And the Abbot chose a second monk; and he walked up and down the church in the morning, at noonday, in the quiet evening, and at midnight. And he saw all the traceries that the sunlight and the moonlight made upon the walls as they shone through the trees. And one night he thought he saw a vision of a Christ upon a cross with his feet upon the head of Pilate; and he rose next day and drew out the vision with a burnt stick upon a white board, and showed it to the Abbot, who said, "Work on; carve it in stone." And the monk watched another night, and he saw the same picture; but it seemed different, and now Pilate was on the cross with his feet upon the head of Christ. And he was perplexed, and came and told them, and the Abbot said, "Stay a little; perhaps the work is not for you." So the brotherhood waited, feeling sure that someone would do it in the end, even if they died before the work was carved.

But one evening after vespers a man came into the church tired and footsore, and they asked him who he was and why he came there; and he said he was a worker in stone from a distant land, and he came there because he was going to the court and had lost his way. Then they asked him if he had ever carved an altar-piece, and he said, "No," but he could carve figures and faces, and the wild beasts of the forest. Then they asked if he was a Christian, but he did not seem to know quite what they meant; and they turned away. But the Abbot called the man to his cell, and said, "You see the wall is bare, and we cannot fill it. Stay with us and watch the wall, for perhaps the work is yours."

So the man stayed, and the monks taught him, and he joined



their company, and two monks were told to read to him the stories of the Gospels and the Saints. And some of them he would not listen to; but others he would hear over and over again, just as children love to hear the same tale. And at last he began to walk about the church, and he came to the Abbot eagerly, and said, "Father, the work is mine; the work is mine."

So they asked him what sort of figure he would carve, and he drew upon the board the figure of a man kneeling and bending forward, with his hands open thus. And they all said, "That is a Christ; but what does it mean? What is in the hands? Why is the open slab of stone before them?" And the man said, "I do not know; that is the work." And the monks would have refused it; but their Abbot said, "Work on."

So the man went out to the quarry, and they helped him to bring his huge slab of stone into the mason's yard, and the larger block for his kneeling figure. And as he worked from day to day they would say to him, "Is the figure changed at all? Is there anything yet in the hands?" But he said, "No; the hands are empty; it is still the same."

And at last the work was finished, and they brought it into the church and set it up. The figure indeed was beautiful to look upon; there was the Christ upon his knees facing the church; his eyes were cast down, and his hands were outspread as though something lay upon them. Yet the hands were empty, and the monks could not understand it; but the Abbot answered, "Wait." So they set about carving the wall all round the altar-piece, and set their ladders up, and sang and whistled as before.

And one afternoon, when they were finishing the wall and the church door was open, they heard the sound of a distant horn, and the cry of dogs far away. "It is the hunt," they said; for the forest was part of a lord's domain, and in it he and his men would often hunt the deer. As their god Woden hunted so did they. And the cries came nearer, and at last through the open door of the church darted a stag, and looked round wildly. Then up the nave he dashed all among the monks. And a monk ran to the great door and made it fast, and in an instant all could hear the baying of the dogs without, and the voice of the lord, "Let us in, monks." But the Abbot cried to his monks, "Range yourselves round the altar, and take

your chisels and your hammers in your hands; they shall not hurt the stag. You may have to fight; and if you fight, fight well." Then he went down to the church door, and again the voice cried, "Let us in, or we will break down your door." And the Abbot threw the door wide open, and stood there; and past him rushed the dogs and bounded up the church; but the huntsmen stood still. And as the dogs came at them each monk seized one by the throat and held him fast, barking and struggling.

And at the door the lord said, "Abbot, we only want our stag; we will not hurt your god." And the rest took up the word, "We know not your god: Woden the Hunter, Woden, Woden." And the dogs kept barking, and the horses stamped on the pavement by the door. Then said the Abbot, "Listen, and I will let you pass. If one of us should flee from death and come to your castle, and call on Woden for help, and his enemy and Woden's enemy should come and tear him away and kill him, what would Woden say?" "Woden would follow him and curse him," they cried, "in life and in death." "Come, then," said the Abbot, "take your stag." And he made way for them, and up the aisles they passed, and there behind the ring of monks and baying dogs they saw the stag panting and almost dead upon the slab of stone, with his head lying on the outstretched hands; and over him drooped the still stone face. And the lord looked and hesitated, and then said, "Their god has taken him; call back the dogs." So the huntsmen dragged the growling dogs down the church, and the door was shut again for fear of them. But all that evening and that night the stag lay where he was, as if he had been carved in stone. And in the morning they set him free in the forest, and they came to the man who had carved the Christ, and said, "It *was* the work; it *was* the work. We will hew you out another block, and you shall make the figure lying on the slab of stone, and we will call the place the Church of the Hunted Stag."